

My Brother's Keeper: Just out of prison, Cairo brothers lean on each other as they cut a new path forward

By: Molly Parker

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CAIRO — Landus Jackson feels at home cutting hair behind the bright red chair in the booth he rents at Shear Perfect salon in Cairo.

After eight and a half years behind bars, he's home at last. He walked out of the Vienna Correctional Center on Oct. 4 and started his new career less than two weeks later. A picture of Jackson hugging his teenage daughter as he stepped through the prison doors is displayed on a shelf next to hair products.

A little further south on Sycamore Street, his brother, Correy Wilson, has opened a detailing shop called On the Spot.

Wilson returned home from his two-year prison sentence about four months before Jackson's release. Wilson served his short sentence at Menard Correctional Center. He opened the detailing shop about a month ago. It's a business he had before, but now he owns his garage.

With some good old-fashioned elbow grease, Wilson is cleaning cars and cleaning up his act.

The two brothers — Jackson, age 40, and Wilson, age 42 — are leaning on each other as they seek a new path forward as returning citizens determined not to go back — to prison, or to the ways that landed them there.

Landus Jackson glances out the window as he sits in his barbershop waiting on customers on Wednesday morning, November 22, in Cairo.

My brother's keeper

Jackson and Wilson both said they have set up a winning equation that includes God, gainful employment and the support of family and friends.

Many days, the brothers have lunch together. They attend church together. Thanksgiving this year was spent together at Wilson's home.

The two have made a promise to one another to offer up some tough love if either sees the other slipping.

"They are two brothers who will not let the other brother get out of hand," said their father, Wesley Wilson, of nearby Mound City.

They are not naive about the challenges ahead. Jackson and Wilson both said they understand the odds for returning citizens to land back in prison, anecdotally and statistically. This was not the first prison tour for either brother, and behind bars, both said they met people who considered a prison sentence little more than an inconvenient interruption to their criminal pursuits.

For some, that may be by choice, but for most people, it's more complicated than that, Jackson said.

Some people, Jackson said, can't see another way, or are afraid of failing at an honest career.

"I met a lot of guys in there that were like that," Jackson said. "They didn't see a way out. Or didn't think they could make it. They didn't want to try something new ... and fail at it. So they did what was more comfortable."

There are others who, at one time, were determined to stay out of prison, but fell back into crime when they were turned away by employers because of their "felon" label. Or perhaps they lost a job and were faced with the uncertainty of how to provide for themselves and their families, Correy Wilson said.

“There’s always the temptation,” Wilson said. “Around here, there’s not much, so it’s easy to fall into the hole.”

Wilson, who has six children ranging in age from 11 to 23, said the “not much” he refers to is economic opportunities in Cairo and surrounding communities in Southern Illinois.



Landus Jackson pays close attention to his work as he trims the hair of his cousin, Ray Whittaker, at his barbershop on Wednesday in Cairo. Jackson is the only licensed barber in the area.

Byron Hetzler, The Southern

The revolving door

Though not condoning bad decisions, Wilson said it can be hard for people to resist the temptation to turn to selling drugs or other criminal activity to make quick money. That's particularly true for people with felony records who can't find employment or lose a job and find themselves in a crisis trying to figure out how to provide for themselves or their family.

Wilson said he sold marijuana in the past for that reason. He said he knows how easy it is to find oneself sucked back into the lifestyle, particularly when the job outlook is bleak.

Indeed, a large number of offenders who live in communities that stretch from Cairo to Chicago are caught in the prison system’s revolving door. That also means the vast majority of crimes in Illinois in any given year are committed by people with criminal records, according to a summer 2015 report from the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council.

According to that report, 48 percent of people released from prison every year recidivate within three years, and 19 percent recidivate within one year.

How to slow that vicious and repetitive cycle is one of the most vexing challenges facing the Illinois Department of Corrections, Illinois taxpayers and people with felony records seeking a second chance at success in mainstream society.

The average taxpayer cost associated with one incident of recidivism is about \$40,500. Some of those who cycle in and out do so because of technical violations of parole. When the crime involves a victim, the average cost per incident jumps to \$119,000, a figure that considers the cost to taxpayers, victims and other indirect costs, according to the report.

But the numbers aren't the entire story. People can change, the brothers said.

Wilson said he has served four relatively short prison sentences since the mid-1990s, for felony convictions and violations of parole or probation related to those convictions.

His criminal record includes convictions of possession of a weapon by a felon, and driving on a license suspended because of a DUI offense.

Jackson has been to prison twice. He most recently was sentenced for a conviction of aggravated battery with a firearm.

He served his first stint in prison at the age of 20, but his sentence was much shorter at two years. In 1996, he was convicted of felony mob action. He was on probation at the time for a 1994 conviction of obstructing justice.

Breaking the cycle

Back in their hometown of Cairo, Jackson and Wilson said they are determined to prove that the cycle can be broken.

It helps to have support, Wilson said. But it is an individual decision when it comes down to it.

“To me, it’s on the person,” Wilson said Friday as he detailed a vehicle at his shop, stopping only occasionally to give directions to an employee. “If you want to stay focused and get out and go straight and do what you need to do to get back to society, you can do it. If you have a weak mind, it’s a little bit harder for you.”

Their father, Wesley Wilson, said moving forward requires both taking responsibility for and making peace with prior mistakes. “In order to get to the future you have to let your past go,” he said.

Wilson lives in Cairo. Jackson is living with his father and stepmother in Mound City while completing six months of house arrest, which began upon his release in October. Jackson said he’s saving money from his job and intends to secure his own place after completing this restrictive community sentence that requires him to be home when he’s not at work or church or tending to other approved activities. He will serve three years mandatory supervised release after that.

Seeing to it that both sons have a successful reintegration and promising future is a family affair, he said.

“We lean on each other,” Wesley Wilson said. “We make sure each one of us is doing what’s right. In order for them to be successful, I have to be successful. In order for them to see happiness and success, I have to show it to them.”

Wilson, who is a deacon at the First Missionary Baptist Church, said he also believes his sons have something to give back to the community in mentoring youth on the consequence of illegal activities. They can do that in their interactions with teens, but also by living the example of a reformed life, he said. Jackson has already given a formal talk to youth at the church, and Wilson said he expects his son will do more of that.

Jackson said that a lot of the mentoring he offers is while cutting the hair of teens, and he prefers to do it in the form of a conversation than a lecture.

Jackson said he tells the young men, “I’m not trying to tell you what to do. I’m just trying to tell you where you’re going if you do this, or where you’re going if you do that. What direction you’re headed in.”

A day of reckoning

Jackson said the first time he went to prison as a young man, it didn't sink in that he was on a path to long-term incarceration.

But Jackson said he will never forgot his day of reckoning, as the Alexander County judge he stood before announced how he would pay for his misdeeds.

"When he sentenced me to 10 years, it was like, 'Oh man. OK.' My heart dropped," Jackson said.

The sentence range for felony aggravated battery with a firearm is between six and 30 years, so Jackson said it was a blessing that it wasn't even more time. Held at the Tri-County Detention Center in Ullin as his case progressed through Alexander County Circuit Court, Jackson said he had a lot of time to think about how he would manage serving years in prison, and what kind of life he would make for himself on the other side.

"When I was in county going back and forth to court, I made up my mind what I was going to do before I even got sentenced. I set three goals: get a GED, get my barber's license and to go home a better man," Jackson said.

Jackson said he grew up in church but started seeking God personally in jail, attending Sunday services that a volunteer officiated. "It went from there," he said. "I knew I had to make a change. ... I made my mind up that I had to come home with a different mindset than I had when I went in."

A cut above

Jackson began his sentence at Menard Correctional Center. A few years into his incarceration, he earned his high school equivalency diploma, he said. A prison worker told him he had potential as a barber, and encouraged him to apply to the cosmetology program at Vienna Correctional Center. Jackson was transferred there and enrolled in the program.

He took easily to the program and found a career calling. After completing his coursework, he was put to work in the prison cutting the hair of staff and other inmates.

"I love cutting hair," he said. "I'm eager to get up every morning to go in and cut hair. I was like that in there (prison)."

When Jackson walked out of Vienna Correctional Center this past month, he had his cosmetology license in hand.

Corrections' officials invited two Southern Illinois media outlets, including The Southern Illinoisan, to a news conference that day on the prison grounds where state officials awarded him that certificate. They celebrated that day because it was the first time in recent memory where an inmate was able to walk out the prison doors with certificate in hand. That was made possible by regulatory changes made by the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation (IDFPR).

People with felony convictions seeking a cosmetology license are generally required to appear before the Barber, Cosmetology, Esthetics, Hair Braiding and Nail Technology Board before their license is issued.

Before, inmates had to wait until they had returned to society, and then schedule an appointment with the board. The delays often led to frustrations, and some inmates didn't follow through. The new rules allow the board to meet with the inmates via teleconference while they are still in prison.

Jackson was the first to benefit from this new rule change. At least another 11 inmates have completed their coursework and examinations and are in the pipeline to meet with the board closer to their exit date, said Terry Horstmann, IDFPR spokesman.

Correy Wilson said he thinks the department's new policy is a great step, and would like to see IDOC put more emphasis on career training for inmates and job placement assistance as they return to society.

Wanted: Jobs for ex-prisoners

People need to have a way to make a living, he said. Assistance with finding work is particularly important for people returning to communities where options are scarce, he said. Wilson said he believes improving career training programs is the No. 1 thing that the state can do to improve recidivism rates.

Wilson said it seemed to him as though the prison system offered more counseling and job training skills 20 years ago as compared to today. During his most recent incarceration at Menard, Wilson said it seemed as though a lot of people were just sitting in their cells rather than taking part in rehabilitative activities.

Upon release, he said, "They're just sticking you out there, and saying, 'Stay out of trouble.' It's easier said than done."

For Jackson, a smooth transition

Jackson agreed that having his cosmetology license handed to him on the way out the door has made the transition back to society much smoother. He started work 13 days after his release. He works six full-time days a week at the salon, starting every morning at 9 a.m.

"It's been fast, but it's been good, though," he added. "I didn't think it was going to go as smooth as it has been — for the most part, anyway."

He said his goal, after working for several years, is to apply for his cosmetology instructor's license. In the meantime, he's looking forward to the day when he can travel again. He's longing to hit the open roads, and has his sights on a trip to the ocean.

"I'm not a bad guy at heart. It's just the bad decisions I made. I made a lot of bad decisions," Jackson said. "But I've made a turnaround ... I'm still working, but I have made a big turn."

http://thesouthern.com/news/local/just-out-of-prison-cairo-brothers-lean-on-each-other/article_4d0f62d3-e69d-5b4c-a499-7de7ea9887af.html